

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

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“‘The Son of Man is delivered over into the hands of men,’ Jesus says, ‘and they will kill him, and having killed he will rise after three days.’ But [his disciples] did not understand this utterance, and were afraid to question him.

“...when he had come into the household he asked them, ‘What were you debating on the way?’ But they were silent; for on the way they debated with one another who was greater.”

The question at the heart of this passage is still creating divisions and disagreements: What does it mean to be great?

The disciples are squabbling with each other, though we don’t get to know the details. Translators reasonably assume that they were arguing over which of them was great and which of them not as great. Maybe. Or maybe they were working on something else.

I wonder, because there’s something familiar about this scene. Last week, we heard the first of three different predictions of the passion and resurrection. Once again, this morning, Jesus has spoken about his coming death and resurrection. And after this second announcement, they have still not quite understood.

There’s something about the context of *this* prediction that opens this into a more interesting discussion. And the ambiguity of the Greek allows us to rephrase the disciples’ debate from “*who* is the greatest” to “*what is* greatness.”

That’s a far more intriguing question than some petty, self-promoting shouting match. If they were arguing about personal status and honor, it’s almost inconceivable that Jesus did not hear what they were talking because conversations about that particular concern still tend to be fairly lively in Middle Eastern culture.

And so maybe, instead, the teaching that the Son of Man must suffer and die has prompted questions about greatness itself. Because while they were still on the way, they were afraid to ask Jesus questions specifically, our text says, about his betrayal, his death and resurrection.

Surely a man with the power to intimidate his opponents, to instill fear in those who dare to question him, a man with the power to drive out the weak and those who are different – surely such a ruler *must* be greater than a wandering servant who promotes solidarity with people living with betrayal, violence and death.

How can Jesus be serious that a self-giving servant is a greater Messiah than a self-serving Caesar? This abnormal teaching prompts questions that his followers are afraid to ask. And at the root of them all is this: what does it mean to be great?

“What were you debating on the way?” Jesus asks. “On the way,” the disciples and others were physically following Jesus; actively trying to live into the values of the coming realm of heaven. For Jesus, “on the way” means moving ever closer to Jerusalem and his death on the cross. For his followers, “on the way” is the path of discipleship.

And here in the house, his followers are silent.

Now, the house at Capernaum where Jesus lived was much like the house of St. Elizabeth where Christ lives – they are both places where those who follow Jesus can question and learn to probe more deeply into what Jesus the Anointed Son of Man teaches about walking on the way in the shadow and light of the Cross.

Jesus moves into the fear and silence of his followers without scolding them, without chastising them. He avoids recognition, not to prevent his death or keep his pending passion hidden. Jesus closely guards the precious time he has left to replace the disciples’ fear and ignorance with teachings about becoming the new humanity that he envisions.

And so, he gets the attention of the twelve. There are also obviously others also there because there are children present. Jesus sits in a teaching posture and then says something nearly unfathomable meant to provoke a little moment of enlightenment: “Anyone who wishes to be first, shall be last of all and the servant of all.”

Now, its predictable that when a spiritual teaching is first introduced to deep-seated perspective, people tend to transform the teaching more than the teaching transforms the person. Given the opportunity, the people in the house listening to Jesus teach can easily drop it into a habitual pattern of reasoning.

“OK,” they might think to themselves, “I know that I’m greater than these other folks, and if I can do this servant monkey-business for a

while, eventually they will come to recognize how great I am too. Better still, I'll have built up my reputation in heaven!"

If you think I'm kidding, let me tell you about a former client who wanted desperately to learn about monastic life. We spent a few days on a retreat at New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, where we met and talked with the former Abbot, my friend, Dom Robert Hale.

After a beautiful chat about humility, my client and I were walking back to our cells for the evening. He stopped and looked me right in the eye. Obviously moved, he said, in complete sincerity: "You know what? I'm going to become the humblest guy in the world."

I gave him a second to let his own words find their target. The realization of the absurdity of his claim washed over his entire body. And then he laughed. That moment was the roots of what has since become a good friendship.

Jesus did not give his followers much time to drop into the ruts of their habitual thinking. Instead, he did something outrageous. He took a small child and put it in their midst. Folding the child in his arms, Jesus said, "Whoever in my name receives one of the little children, like this one, receives me; and whoever receives me receives not me but the one having sent me forth."

There are still almost 13,000 migrant children and teenagers still being held separated from their families in federally contracted shelters? They have no rights, no influence, no social standing in this country. We are treating them much like first century Middle Easterners might have.

And that is precisely what makes this reading among the most scandalous of all the scandals in Mark's gospel. You see, most of us here in the 21<sup>st</sup> c. Pacific Northwest have no trouble seeing children as valued. There are some who put children above all else.

Not so in the ancient world. Even within the family structure, a minor child was little more than a slave. When a famine came, adults ate first and the children last. Children, so the thinking went, came into this world basically evil and needed strong, even violent, discipline if they were ever going to mature. Children were utterly dependent, utterly vulnerable, utterly powerless.

By identifying so radically with a child, by embracing the road to betrayal, death and resurrection, Jesus redefines greatness as godliness. Greatness defined by this world is characterized by power; greatness defined as godliness is characterized by strength. Worldly greatness is marked by attainment, Godly greatness by generosity. Worldly greatness by self-serving fame, Godly greatness by self-emptying service.

It is not in the glory of the Caesars, but in the vulnerability of a child that we encounter God. The path to greatness is not walked with bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts, boastful and false to the truth. The path to godly greatness is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

Before his followers can fall into the trap of simply overhauling earthly strategies in the pursuit of personal greatness, Jesus models the way to proceed in the service of Godly greatness. He embraces a child; one of the most vulnerable of all people in society.

And then he describes the Divine strategy for walking this Godly path: “Whoever in my name receives one of the little children, like this one, receives me; and whoever receives me receives not me but the one having sent me forth.”

The strategy Jesus describes involves a sequence of increasingly transparent transfigurations. Following Jesus on the Godly path to greatness can start with the embrace of one of those that earthly powers consider marginal – those without influence or social standing.

If we take on that awareness, if we adopt the consciousness of Christ, we begin to see Jesus in anyone and everyone we meet, regardless of their ability to enhance our status. Christ-consciousness unfolds before our slowly opening eyes as we receive each other, and Christ is revealed in each other.

And then there is a second transparency as the revelation of Christ gives way to the One God who sees us beneath all that we have – our possessions and titles, our social status – and who also sees beneath the lack or the loss of these things.

What God sees and deeply loves beneath all of that is the bare, basic humanity common to all people.

And so, for us to see and receive each other with that same love is to welcome the Son of Man in each person. The face of our shared humanity reveals the One Source, the One Consciousness, the One Breath.

And *that* is what is most beautiful and true. *That* is the greatness of God, the ultimate first, and at the same time, the least, because it is universal – there is only One. Making ourselves servants to that leastness in each other, welcoming what is common to all of us, makes us paradoxically first.

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